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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAGHDAD 003870

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: BASRA REGION REFERENDUM SUPPORTERS SEEK SIGNATURES AND ALLIES

REF: BAGHDAD 3602

Classified By: Senior Advisor Gordon Gray for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

¶1. (C) Meetings held in early December between Senior Advisor Gray and a range of Basra leaders suggest that organizers of one-province region formation will have difficulty gathering enough signatures to force a referendum and are unlikely to achieve their ultimate objective of winning a referendum vote. Most Basrawis indicated that they favor some form of region formation for Basra, but do not want to support an initiative promoted by parliamentarian Abd al-Latif and unpopular retiring Governor Mohammed Wa'eli. Latif and Wa'eli continue to seek additional sources of support, including tribal leaders and neighboring Sunni governments. The Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC) will open polling stations in Basra Province from December 15 to January 14 for collecting the signatures needed to force a referendum. End summary.

Busy Season at the GEO

¶2. (C) In late November, officials at IHEC's Governorate Electoral Office (GEO) certified the nearly 35,000 signatures (over two percent of the voters) submitted on November 10 by Basra one-province region formation petition organizers (reftel). To facilitate the next step in the process -- collecting signatures from ten percent of the province's 1,409,393 eligible voters within 30 days -- the GEO will open 34 polling centers around the province between December 15 and January 14. If sufficient signatures are gathered, the GEO would then have two weeks in which to certify results before transmitting them to the Council of Ministers. Complicating matters further, the GEO will have to administer the signature drive in the middle of the provincial election campaign season, and certify results three days before provincial elections are scheduled to take place. The GEO Deputy Director told Gray he was confident that the GEO could handle everything. However, the frequent calls he had to make during the meeting just to answer simple questions did little to inspire confidence in the GEO's ability to carry out region referendum and provincial election duties simultaneously.

141,000

¶3. (C) Basrawis express mixed opinion about whether Latif and company can gather the 141,000 signatures needed to hold the referendum. Some of the petition's strongest opponents, such as Sayyid al-Shuhada (SAS) chief and ISCI parliamentarian Dagher al-Shebib al-Moussawi, gave them no

chance at gathering the names. However, a roundtable discussion on the subject at Moussawi Mosque, featuring several members of Basra's Law Support Council, brought out a wider range of opinion. Sheikh Abdel al-Moussawi, the mosque's leading cleric, estimated that a referendum was likely to be held but unlikely to succeed. This view appeared to be the consensus on the Council, with only Dr. Chaltag Abud Sharad (Da'wa) strongly doubting that a referendum would take place. Basra GEO officials told Gray that they expected organizers to gain Sadrists support and thereby gather enough signatures. (Comment: The prevailing view in Basra is that most Sadrists will not support the Governor's region formation campaign. End comment.)

We Support Region Formation. Well, Not Really

¶4. (C) Even if the organizers force a referendum, no one we met in Basra apart from the organizers categorically supported the effort or believed that a referendum would succeed. Election candidates and other local leaders frequently distinguish between support for some form or region-formation in Basra -- which they almost always favor -- and backing for a Wa'eli-led referendum campaign, which few want. Several provincial election candidates, ranging from Iraqi Islamic Party (Sunni) leader Jasim Ahmed Jasim to Unity and Justice Party leader Aqeel al-Khalidi (Shi'a/Sadrists), told Gray when initially asked that they favor one-province region-formation. When pushed, however, they came up with a series of reforms needed in order for them to support Wa'eli's referendum proposal. These reforms

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are generally non-starters with Wa'eli. Jasim, for example, favors a one-province region but wants strong security links with Baghdad and guarantees of protection for Sunni minorities. Abdel Moussawi talked of the need to develop safeguards, negotiated with the central government, to limit corruption and avoid the conflicts that the Kurdish Regional Government has with the Prime Minister.

Pay Me

¶5. (C) Tribal leaders may be the strongest potential source of support for the referendum campaign. Latif and Governor Wa'eli held meetings November 16-17 with ten key tribal leaders, reportedly providing funds for each, in order to organize support from their members to sign the referendum register. The leaders include general tribal sheikhs from the Bani Mansur, al-Sharash, al-Amarah, and al-Halaf tribes, among others, plus leading sheikhs from the Bani Malik tribe. Some of these sheikhs have since announced public support for the initiative, while others have not. It is unclear how effective these sheikhs will be, but they have the ability to raise tribal support if they are genuinely committed to the Governor's cause. While anecdotal evidence and MNF-I polling indicate that the Prime Minister is vastly more popular than Wa'eli in the province, many tribal leaders are still upset with Maliki about unkept promises made in exchange for support during the Charge of the Knights operation earlier this year.

Kuwait and Iran

¶6. (C) The Governor also tried to raise potential support from Kuwait during a September 3 meeting with Kuwaiti officials. While it appears he failed, many Basrawis believe that Kuwait and Saudi Arabia may be favorably inclined to the one-province region concept. Jasim from IIP, who was aware of the Governor's approach to Kuwaitis, suggested that Iraq's

Sunni neighbors would quietly support the initiative as a means of forestalling the possible formation of a nine-province Shi'a region. In contrast, SAS head Dagher Jasim al-Shebibi, proponent of a nine-province region, relayed concerns of the Iranian government. Dagher told Gray that Iran, while not of one opinion about region-formation in Basra, was less than enthusiastic about the idea because of its own ethnic minority enclaves in neighboring Khuzestan and other border areas.

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